Brazilian endemic violence and the ethos of protracted conflicts

Violencia endémica en Brasil y el ethos de los conflictos prolongados
Violência endêmica no Brasil e o ethos de conflitos prolongados

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Abstract

Brazil is confronted with endemic violence marked by tens of thousands of homicides annually. This study examines how an ethos of conflict perpetuates this scenario, using Bar-Tal's theoretical framework to analyze societal belief themes identified through semi-structured interviews. These themes map the narrative sustaining Brazil's culture of violence. The research reveals the role of conflict-supportive narratives in rationalizing and perpetuating violence, providing insights into the complex interplay between law enforcement, organized crime, and societal beliefs. Besides inspiring further development of the theory, the study suggests that fruitful strategies of conflict resolution could be implemented considering these findings.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, violence, ethos of conflict, Brazil.

Resumen

Brasil se enfrenta a una violencia endémica marcada por decenas de miles de homicidios anuales. Este estudio examina cómo un ethos de conflicto perpetúa este escenario, utilizando el marco teórico de Bar-Tal para analizar temas de creencias sociales identificados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas. Estos temas trazan el mapa de la narrativa que sostiene la cultura de violencia en Brasil. La investigación revela el papel de las narrativas que apoyan el conflicto en la racionalización y perpetuación de la violencia, proporcionando una visión del complejo entrelazado entre las fuerzas de seguridad, el crimen organizado y las creencias sociales. Además de inspirar un mayor desarrollo de la teoría, el estudio sugiere que podrían implementarse estrategias fructíferas de resolución de conflictos considerando estos hallazgos.

Palabras clave: Resolución de conflictos, violencia, ethos del conflicto, Brasil.

Resumo

O Brasil enfrenta uma violência endêmica marcada por dezenas de milhares de homicídios anualmente. Este estudo examina como um ethos de conflito perpetua esse cenário, usando a estrutura teórica de Bar-Tal para analisar temas de crenças sociais identificados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas. Esses temas mapeiam a narrativa que sustenta a cultura da violência no Brasil. A pesquisa

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revela o papel das narrativas de apoio ao conflito na racionalização e perpetuação da violência, fornecendo uma visão do complexo entrelaçamento das forças de segurança, do crime organizado e das crenças sociais. Além de inspirar o desenvolvimento de mais teorias, o estudo sugere que estratégias frutíferas de resolução de conflitos podem ser implementadas considerando essas descobertas.

Palavras-chave: Resolução de conflitos, violência, ethos de conflito, Brasil.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"War" has become a common term to frame policies on organized crime in Brazil, echoing Nixon's war on drugs in the 1970s. Terms like "pacification," "territory," and "enemy" are everyday vocabulary for politicians and the media, referring not only to law enforcement but also to struggles between criminal groups (Leite, 2012; Sanjurjo & Feltran, 2015). Benziman (2020) notes that framing a policy issue as a war fosters public acceptance of its costly side effects, such as harsh police control and civilian casualties.

Brazil has one of the highest rates of violent deaths globally, with an average of about 51,500 deaths yearly from 2011 to 2022 (FBSP, 2021; FBSP, 2023). In 2019, the police killed 6,357 people, and in 2018, 6,175. Police officers are also victims, with 198 killed in 2020, 145 in 2021, and 161 in 2022. In 2013, a record 490 officers were killed (FBSP, 2019; FBSP, 2020; FSBP, 2023; Cerqueira & Bueno, 2020).

This conflictual environment is deeply embedded in Brazilian culture. The media dedicates considerable space to it, focusing on different 'belligerent' groups. Many books, songs, poems, novels, and paintings have portrayed this violence (Menezes, 2013; Teixeira, 2013). Paiva (2019) demonstrates how crime evolved with the consolidation of large, organized groups known as *facções* (factions), where belonging, identity, and protection are deeply connected to social group affiliation.

Given this background, this study analyzes how individuals externalize aspects of a societal narrative about this conflictual state, based on Bar-Tal's (2013) theoretical framework on societal beliefs and values. The researched population is professionally acquainted with the crime phenomenon. The roadmap of this article includes a brief literature review on the ethos of conflict and Brazil's violence sociological features, an analysis under Bar-Tal's framework, and an extraction of the overall meaning, accounting for the study's limitations.

This article evolved from two rounds of semi-structured interviews. The first aimed to extract social-psychological aspects of police officers trained for deadly encounters, identifying three aspects: justification for killing, high perceived personal price, and bellicose policing. The presence of Bar-Tal's societal themes in these interviews inspired a second round, keeping the same questions and structure. This article presents the analysis and findings of the two rounds altogether, now under Bar-Tal's lenses. The findings suggest a master narrative perpetuating violence from the perspective of law enforcement employees. The remarkable fact is that the interview's set of questions and structure were not designed to deal with Bar-Tal's ethos of conflict, but to extract the aforementioned aspects.

2. ENDEMIC VIOLENCE, LAW ENFORCEMENT, AND CRIMINAL FACTIONS

Culture of violence in Brazil is an historical phenomenon. The colonial mindset was constructed under corsair ethics, with wealth looted through violence. Amerindians and later African slaves suffered many forms of violence to sustain the colonial system, producing a deeply embedded anti-humanist culture (Almeida, 2019; Krenak, 2020; Rolim, 2016; Argolo, Duarte & Queiroz, 2016; Cardoso, 2013).

Schwarcz (2019) offers a historical and sociopolitical analysis of the roots and continuities of authoritarian practices in Brazil's development. The author demonstrates how colonial legacy, founded on the violence of the slave system and hierarchical power structures, contributed to consolidating an ethos marked by paternalism, the oppression of marginalized groups, and inequality in the exercise of citizenship (see also Almeida, 2019 and Krenak, 2020). Schwarcz argues that Brazilian authoritarianism is not limited to dictatorial governments or moments of institutional rupture; rather, it permeates daily life and social relations, manifesting itself in discourses and practices that reinforce racial discrimination, police violence, the concentration of power in economic and political elites, and a culture of privilege perpetuated by sociability patterns inherited from the past.

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Her investigation retraces the trajectory of these authoritarian elements from the colonial period onward, highlighting how the consolidation of independence and the subsequent formation of the nation-state did not break with a hierarchical and exclusionary logic. The late abolition of slavery and the ways in which the transition to free labor—without broad policies of inclusion and reparation—perpetuated racial discrimination and power asymmetries, reinforcing authoritarianism in social and economic relations. Schwarcz stresses that although Brazil has experienced democratic periods, such as the post-1985 era, various forms of control and the restriction of rights persist, expressed through institutional violence, media manipulation, and limitations on civil liberties, frequently justified by calls for order and progress. Brazilian authoritarianism is thus not a sporadic phenomenon but a long-term process sustained by a set of values, habits, and institutions that endure and evolve over the centuries.

Krenak (2020) perceives Brazil's endemic violence as rooted in a colonial worldview that has alienated humans from their environment and disregarded indigenous cosmologies. In his perspective, the dispossession of native territories and the imposition of development models that ignore ancestral wisdom have enabled a cycle of aggression, both against nature and marginalized groups. By calling for the recognition of interdependence among all living beings, Krenak asserts that only a radical rethinking of human-nature relations, coupled with genuine respect for indigenous sovereignty, can break these violent patterns and foster genuine social and ecological balance.

Similarly, Munduruku (2012; 2014; 2016) argues that violence in Brazil is rooted in colonial structures that persist to this day. The dispossession and oppression of indigenous populations—through enslavement, forced assimilation, and territorial usurpation—have shaped a social ethos where aggression and exclusion became normalized. According to Munduruku, this brutality forms a continuum that directly connects past atrocities to current systemic discrimination, racism, and cultural invisibility. The author criticizes dominant historical narratives and advocates for educational reforms that elevate indigenous wisdom. In his work, it is exposed how deeply embedded colonial practices remain in Brazilian institutions. Munduruku calls for a collective rethinking of national identity as a way to address the country's pervasive violence.

This continuous brutality is subject to many studies and observed in daily social life. Soares (2019) describes the fratricide war in Brazil, marked by high numbers of police killings and police officers killed by criminals. According to the author, the roots of violence lie in deep inequality, structural racism, and the architecture of law enforcement, which aims to maintain state security, incarcerate young black and poor people, wage war against crime suspects (including extrajudicial executions), and criminalize social movements.

Ferreira & Maschietto (2024) also stress how Brazil's state formation has been historically marked by violence, a legacy inherited from colonialism and slavery system. These foundations laid out a form of symbolic violence in which racism, class-based contempt, and structural inequities became normalized, effectively placing Black and poor citizens in a vulnerable position for centuries. From the colonial-era plantation lords who wielded near-absolute control over enslaved populations, to modern-day "extermination groups" in the country's Northeast, this pattern has entrenched the dehumanization of certain social segments under the guise of maintaining 'order.'

In this context, the authors sustain that the supposed separation between public and private interests remains blurred. Brazilian elites, historically accustomed to merging private authority with the official power of state institutions, frequently co-opt law enforcement agencies in service of their own gains. As a result, death squads, militias, or other armed networks—often composed of off-duty or retired police officers—carry out extra-judicial executions and social cleansing initiatives that target the most marginalized. These violent practices demonstrate the failure of public security arrangements to protect the common good and highlight the instrumentalization of state structures to preserve privilege.

Criminal organizations in Brazil grew in this context. The *Comando Vermelho* (CV), based in Rio de Janeiro, was founded in 1979 in an island-prison where common criminals were held with political prisoners. This led to an ethos of resistance and a narrative of countering state institutions (Biondi, 2017; Faria, 2005).

According to Amorim (1993), this prison environment served as a kind of "laboratory" for the CV's ideological and operational structures, marking a shift from sporadic criminal activity to a centralized network with far-reaching influence.

The rise of the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) in the late 20th century brought violence to a new level, with the organization expanding nationally and internationally (Biondi, 2017). Feltran (2018) traces the group's origins to the early 1990s in the São Paulo prison system, illustrating how an initial alliance among inmates, forged under conditions of overcrowding and systemic abuses, gave rise to a well-structured network committed to exerting control within and beyond prison walls. Over time, the PCC expanded from local strategies of prisoner protection to broader illicit markets, including drug trafficking and extortion, thereby acquiring a substantial foothold in peripheral urban areas.

Feltran (2018) situates PCC's expansion within a wider sociopolitical context. The author underscores how systemic inequalities, police violence, and state neglect in marginalized neighborhoods have facilitated the group's growth, turning it into both an illicit authority and a provider of informal governance. PCC's organizational methods hinge on principles of "brotherhood," which emphasize loyalty, mutual support, and internal dispute resolution. This structure has enabled the faction to exert influence not just in prisons, where it began, but also across city regions and even national borders, thanks to a network of individuals who adhere to codes of solidarity and non-aggression under PCC auspices.

Feltran (2018) reveals how the PCC's capacity to negotiate and maintain relative order in certain territories often positions it as a *de facto* mediator between residents, local commerce, and corrupt state agents, thereby blurring the lines between criminality and governance. It becomes evident how the PCC is not as a mere criminal enterprise, but an entity deeply embedded in social relations and shaped by the country's structural disparities.

The increasing intensity of organized crime, not limited to CV and PCC, has led to an arms race with police forces. Historically, Brazilian police have been selective in exercising lethal or violent power, but the rise of organized crime has legitimized deadly outcomes and even innocent casualties (Mattos, 2016; Gonçalves, 2021; Cano, 2010; Ceccato, Melo & Kahn, 2018; Monteiro et al., 2020). Fear of crime affects public attitudes toward security policies, tolerating increased police lethality as the overall number of homicides decreases (Ceccato, Melo & Kahn, 2018).

Police officers are exposed to violence at much higher rates than the general population. The death rate of police officers in São Paulo state was 50 per 100,000 in 2013 and 38.67 per 100,000 in 2014, compared to general death rates of 10.9 and 10.3, respectively (Fernandes, 2016). This exposure significantly impacts their behavior and decision-making regarding the use of force.

The concern with crime and violence has led to the formation of a coalition in Congress, the "Bullet Caucus," composed mostly of former police or military officers. This group advocates for stronger law enforcement agencies, increased budgets, expanded gun ownership, and harsher crime laws (Macaulay, 2019; Romero, 2015).

Kovač and Bezerra (2020) argue that Brazil's narratives of social and economic inequalities, endemic violence, crime, and a weak rule of law are intertwined and need a joint approach to change the scenario. Social injustice in Brazil stems not only from colonial legacies but also from recent deficient crime policies.

Kaldor (2012) describes new wars as occurring when a state has declining resources due to economic degeneration, criminality, corruption, privatization of violence, and compromised political legitimacy. Unlike old wars between states or official entities with well-defined battlefields, new wars involve organized violence for political or private ends and human rights violations (Benziman, 2020; Kaldor, 2012).

Organizations like CV and PCC have emerged as significant international threats due to their capacity to extend their criminal enterprises beyond Brazil's borders. From their origins as prison-based groups, these factions developed sophisticated organizational structures that facilitated their growth and dominance, both inside and outside penal institutions (Biondi, 2016; Dias, 2013). Their operational tactics, initially focused on

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controlling inmate populations and managing illicit activities in correctional facilities, gradually evolved to encompass transnational drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and the establishment of alliances with other criminal networks (Feltran, 2018).

One of the key reasons behind this global expansion lies in the strategic infiltration of border regions in South America. By exploiting weak points of state oversight and corrupting local authorities, the CV and PCC have secured routes through Paraguay, Bolivia, and other neighboring countries, allowing for the large-scale movement of narcotics, weapons, and laundered funds (Lessing, 2017). Such cross-border dynamics underscore that these organizations are not merely Brazilian phenomena; they thrive where governance is fragile and capacity for enforcement is limited, thereby creating conditions for the proliferation of violence and criminal economies.

Their growing involvement in international markets also reveals sophisticated money-laundering schemes, which integrate illicit profits into the formal economies of multiple countries. Through real estate investments, international currency exchanges, and offshore banking, the CV and PCC hide the origins of illegal proceeds, undermining regulatory frameworks and distorting local economic systems (Berg, 2019). Furthermore, their ability to negotiate with other transnational cartels or criminal syndicates increases the potential for armed conflict, the spread of narcotics, and systemic corruption across different regions.

In this context, the security challenges posed by the CV and PCC extend far beyond the Brazilian territory. The diffusion of their operational methods, as well as their capacity to corrupt public officials and penetrate legitimate markets, demonstrates a form of transnational criminal governance that threatens the stability of entire regions. Consequently, tackling these organizations calls for collaborative international efforts, stronger border controls, intelligence-sharing, and policies that address the social and economic vulnerabilities fueling the expansion of these groups (Biondi, 2016; Feltran, 2018; Dias, 2013; Lessing, 2017; Berg, 2019; Birman, 2015).

A recent instance of PCC's deep rooting is a Ministry of Justice investigation on more than one thousand gas stations throughout the country and, more significantly, strong investments in oil refineries and ethanol plants (Ferreira, 2025). Members of Parliament have been advocating for parliamentary investigations on PCC investments on the fuel industry (Soares, 2024).

As such, PCC and CV fit Kaldor's description of new wars. These groups operate without clear victory goals, functioning as parallel states and welfare providers for criminals (Biondi, 2017; Souza Alves, 2008). Despite differences from traditional wars, the endemic violence and high death rates justify analyzing Brazil's conflict as a kind of new war (Kaldor, 2012).

Salamanca & Salcedo-Albarán (2013) have demonstrated how ilegal networks have affected institutions in Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. Through a process of capture of the state, criminal organizations have compromised its efficiency and legitimacy, channeling policy to private criminal interests. PCC and, to a lesser extent, CV, have also managed to create solid bridgeheads on institutions and relevant industry – fuels industry being only a significant instance (Dias & Sotero, 2024; Barcellos & Zaluar, 2014; Buscaglia, 2017). Its networks deeply affect institutions in Paraguay, Bolivia, Colombia and Peru and operate as far as Mozambique (Jesperson & Verrier, 2024).

Understanding Brazil's endemic violence and identifying conflicting groups — law enforcement agencies, criminal factions, civil society, and different social classes — is crucial. Despite blurred lines between these groups, it is expected that they have developed narratives aligning with Bar-Tal's framework on the ethos of conflict. Notwithstanding, it is out of the scope of this work the identification of these groups. Instead, one specific group (law enforcement personnel) is analyzed under the theoretical framework of the Societal Beliefs of an Ethos of Conflict, to which we turn now.

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3. ETHOS OF CONFLICT AND RELATED SOCIETAL BELIEFS

Benziman (2013) notes that even simple social separations create biases towards in-groups and out-groups. In protracted conflicts, this phenomenon intensifies, leading to societal beliefs that shape master narratives and group identities (Bar-Tal, 2013; Benziman, 2013). Neuroimaging studies have shown that the brain processes in-group and out-group information differently (Saarinen, Jääskeläinen, Harjunen, Keltikangas-Järvinen, Jasinskaja-Lahti & Ravaja, 2021).

Bar-Tal (2013) provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-dynamics of intractable conflicts, including the evolution of these conflicts, societal psychological repertoires, conflict maintenance, de-escalation, and peacebuilding.

In Daniel Bar-Tal's theory of conflicts, a narrative is a collective story shared by a society that provides a framework for understanding, interpreting, and responding to the conflict. These narratives are composed of various elements, including historical events, myths, symbols, and collective memories, which together form a coherent story that supports the society's beliefs, values, and attitudes towards the conflict and the opposing group.

Narratives in this framework include Collective Memory and Societal Beliefs. Collective Memory are the way narratives draw upon past events that are perceived as significant by the community. These events are selectively remembered and interpreted to reinforce the narrative's central themes. Societal Beliefs are embedded in and reinforced by narratives.

Narratives help maintain a collective identity by emphasizing a shared history and common destiny. They foster social cohesion by providing a common understanding of the conflict. Narratives also justify the society's actions and policies in the conflict, legitimizing their stance and delegitimizing the opposition. Lastly, narratives mobilize the society for collective action, including support for conflict-related policies and behaviors.

Narratives are resistant to change because they are deeply ingrained in the society's culture and identity. They are reinforced through education, media, political discourse, and other cultural practices. Therefore, narratives play a critical role in sustaining intractable conflicts by perpetuating mutual hostility, fear, and mistrust. They can also impede peace processes by creating rigid perceptions of the conflict and the enemy.

Different approaches argue that focusing on socio-psychological elements may overlook structural and strategic factors in intractable conflicts (Kriesberg, 2004, 2007). Kelman (2007) emphasizes interactive problem-solving and leadership roles, suggesting that heavy emphasis on group identity and collective memory downplays individual agency. Kriesberg and Dayton (2022) approach to conflicts emphasizes the dynamic and multifaceted nature of conflicts, integrating both structural and interactive dimensions. They advocate for constructive conflict resolution, highlighting the importance of understanding underlying causes, power dynamics, and the roles of various stakeholders. Their framework includes strategies for escalation, de-escalation, and sustainable peacebuilding, emphasizing the need for dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaboration among conflicting parties.

Yet, Bar-Tal's focus on social psychological aspects is fruitful, postulating that socio psychology should extend into the societal domain (Reykowski, 2015). The present study focuses on one societal psychological repertoire presented by Bar-Tal (2013): the ethos of conflict. Bar-Tal identifies eight themes of societal beliefs in protracted conflict narratives: justness of one's goals, opponent delegitimization, self-victimhood, positive self-image, security, patriotism, unity, and peace. Each of these themes will be explained bellow, along with the analysis of the *corpus*.

These themes permeate society's understanding as a group, influencing public debates, policies, cultural products, and societal expressions. They form an ethos of conflict, detectable when society members express their values, attitudes, and opinions related to the conflict.

Bar-Tal's framework was inspired by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The universality of his proposals was explored by Elcheroth and Spini (2015), who observed how the model has been transposed to various contexts, aiding in the analysis and design of resolution strategies. They argue that while Bar-Tal's theory has a broad scope, this is both a strength and a potential weakness. If applications of the theory bypass rather than expand and clarify its principles, they risk undermining its potential to bridge general psychological principles and contextualized case studies. Therefore, they suggest that in future developments, it is crucial to specify precisely at what level social-psychological hypotheses about conflict dynamics are meant to be universal. The assumed level of universality has significant theoretical and methodological implications, which should guide research design and the interpretation of findings in future studies inspired by Bar-Tal's work. Hopefully the present work will add insights on this definition, by probing the universality of the societal themes of conflict against the individual-level of people embedded in a very specific protracted conflict.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study applies Bar-Tal's societal themes of protracted conflicts to interpret the discourse of individuals deeply acquainted with Brazilian protracted violence. To build the corpus for analysis, in-depth interviews were conducted, recorded, and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and translated after analysis.

The research design involves a qualitative approach, using thematic analysis to identify societal themes in the narratives of law enforcement officers. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences related to endemic violence and conflict in Brazil.

The recorded interviews and transcripts underwent thematic qualitative analysis. The analysis focused on identifying connections to Bar-Tal's societal themes of protracted conflicts. The themes were then synthesized to extract their meanings and implications for the broader narrative of violence in Brazil.

4.1. Data Collection and Ethical precautions

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with six law enforcement officers. The interviewees were selected randomly from different law enforcement agencies to ensure a broad representation of perspectives. Each agency was contacted and asked to provide access to personnel who were well-acquainted with violent engagements of police forces. This approach was taken to capture a wide range of experiences and insights related to the endemic violence in Brazil. By involving various agencies, the study aimed to neutralize specific biases and offer a more comprehensive view of the attitudes and beliefs within law enforcement regarding the conflict and violence in the country.

All participants gave free and informed consent, and given the right of withdrawal at any point. Agencies were not informed of who was effectively contacted and interviewed. Participants were informed of their pseudonyms used here. To avoid bias, participants were not informed, prior to the interview, about specific research goals. Rather, it was broadly presented as a study on Brazilian violence and police system. The questions were quite open about their personal life and perceptions of national society and police system. The average interview time was about 3 hours-long.

The research population includes (pseudonymous):

Fernando, 53, with 29 years in the police. Born in Santos, São Paulo state. Lives in São Paulo.
Guilherme, 41, a high-ranking federal agency crime analyst for 15 years. Born and lives in Goiânia, Goiás state.
Henrique, 39, with 16 years in the police. Born in Rio de Janeiro, lives in Brasília.
Lucas, 46, a police officer and crime researcher for 21 years.

Marcos, 53, a journalist turned public service crime analyst for 14 years. Born in Rio de Janeiro, lives in Brasília.
William, 41, with 15 years in the police. Born and lives in Rio de Janeiro.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bar-Tal (1998; 2000; 2013), in his socio-psychological analysis of protracted conflicts, defines an "ethos of conflict" as a system of prevailing societal beliefs that helps to legitimize and sustain prolonged hostility. This ethos is organized around eight principal themes, each reflecting a distinct facet of how groups perceive themselves, their adversaries, and the broader context of conflict. Taken together, these eight themes crystallize a worldview in which the group's mission is validated, the adversary is devalued, and collective cohesion is strengthened. The framework illuminates how certain beliefs and narratives become entrenched, shaping group identity, guiding policy, and perpetuating conflict over time.

These themes are explained bellow, and corresponding discourse extracted from the interview is related to each of them.

5.1 Justness of One's Goals

Bar-Tal (2013) posits that societies involved in protracted conflicts develop a belief in the justness of their goals, which legitimizes their actions.Justness of one's goalsconsists of a narrative that gives motivation for ingroup members mobilization by outlining, explaining, and justifying the goals that a party involved in a protracted conflict intends to reach. It provides explanation of why the conflict erupted and why it is desirable to persevere on the conflict and make sacrifices to reach the common goals (Bar-Tal, 2013). All interviewees acknowledged a belligerent attitude among law enforcement officers, justified as a necessary response to Brazil's crime structure.

Lucas differentiated approaches needed to counter white-collar crime and criminal factions like PCC and CV, emphasizing the necessity of violence. He stated, "*The way law enforcement needs to act against these two types of crimes is completely different. White-collar crime demands intelligence and cooperation, but to counter factions' violence, you need to equal violence. There is no way to defeat machine guns with social aids.*"

Marcos echoed this sentiment, saying, "*Unfortunately, the state is hostage to this situation. Long-term policies are needed, but the state must act with force now, or everything will be taken by crime.*"

Fernando connected the justness of his cause to religion: "*I'm very religious. I ask God every time I engage. If it is not by our hands, let it not work. If it's for one of us to be shot, let it not work. We prefer to lose.*"

5.2 Opponent Delegitimization

Delegitimization of the opponent involves portraying the enemy as illegitimate or immoral, reinforcing the justness of one's cause. It categorizes the outgroups into negative social categories that frames them as immoral and acting out of the accepted norms and rules. By violating basic human norms, this outer groups deserves to be opposed and maltreated (Bar-Tal, 2013). This theme was evident in the interviewees' responses, where criminals were dehumanized, and their deaths justified.

Marcos justified the high death toll in police operations (BBC, 2021), stressing that all victims were criminals: "*Those 27, 28 deaths were not planned. But you can be sure all of them were holding a rifle, well known for violent crimes, or both. There were no angels there.*"

Fernando made a strong delegitimizing statement: "*We are taking out bad people who kill others. We are on the side of good; they are on the side of evil. For them, killing a child or an old woman is nothing. For us, it would devastate us.*"

Lucas added, "*This high peak observed in the last decade is related to organized crime. Be sure that many of those dead took the risk by joining crime. Criminals know they die early.*"

5.3 Self-Victimhood

Victimization stems from the ingroup's perception of having endured intentional violence and harm inflicted by the opponent, resulting in lasting consequences. This harm is seen as unjust, undeserved, and immoral, framing the opponent as unjust, harmful, evil, and atrocious. Conversely, the ingroup views itself as just, moral, and humane, positioning itself as the victim in the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013). This theme was intertwined with justness of cause, as interviewees described the harm inflicted by criminals on law enforcement and society.

Guilherme noted, "*We all pay the price of this violence.*"

Marcos emphasized, "*Police officers are much more exposed to violence than the average citizen. Their rate of death per thousand is much higher than Brazil's average.*"

William expressed the emotional toll: "*We create a wolf in ourselves to clash against other wolves. We cannot take off this cover at home. No one bears staying by a wolf's side.*"

Fernando shared, "*We respond to incidents always involving heavy situations. Civilians in fear, laborers shot. We need to be up to it.*"

5.4 Positive Collective Self-Image

Positive self-image involves glorifying the in-group to maintain morale and justify actions. Thesesocietal beliefs are composed by traits, values, or skills that characterizes the ingroup in a positive way, or by past positive actions or contributions to mankind. These beliefs form a shared perception of moral superiority of the ingroup compared to outgroups (Bar-Tal, 2013). This theme was reflected in the interviewees' pride in their professional conduct and societal appreciation.

Guilherme acknowledged improvements in police quality: "*Most police officers agree Brazil needs a complete police cycle. The system is much more professional now, and behavior deviations are exceptions.*"

Lucas mentioned societal support: "*The movie Tropa de Elite intended to criticize police behavior, but society identified Capitão Nascimento as a hero. The population praises the police and wants energetic actions against crime.*"

Marcos noted changes in police corruption patterns: "*Today, the shadow is militia organizations. This resulted from police's mistrust in the justice system. Police arrest endless criminals, but justice is slow and ineffective.*"

William highlighted personal sacrifices: "*I work sacrificing my life. I have principles, values, honor, honesty. This is priesthood.*"

Henrique framed his role as a personal war: "*The system is wrong, and we carry the burden. But I enjoy engaging in this war and will do it until I retire.*"

5.5 Security

Security societal beliefs focus on the need for safety and protection, often justifying harsh measures. They are based on the threats present in the conflict and the necessity to ensure personal and collective safety, stressing the necessary conditions to reach that safety. Security issues are among the most important agenda for societies involved in protracted conflicts and play a central part in the collective identity (Bar-Tal, 2013). Security concerns were prominent, with interviewees advocating for public gun permits and stronger police measures.

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Marcos stressed the necessity of self-defense: "*I don't like campaigns that discourage reacting to armed robberies. It gave criminals absolute certainty they can do whatever they want. I have taught my children how to handle a gun.*"

Fernando highlighted the strength of criminal gangs: "*PCC is very strong. They are our enemies, and we need to be prepared to face them.*"

Lucas emphasized preparedness: "*It is better to have a gun and never use it than to need a gun and not have it.*"

Guilherme countered arguments against gun ownership: "*In the past, murders were passional crimes. Today, citizens want to protect themselves and their families.*"

Henrique, who lost his brother in combat, stated: "*Self-security comes before any right. This is my personal war, but it should be every good citizen's one.*"

5.6 Patriotism

Patriotism involves a strong identification with and loyalty to one's nation. It focuses on the necessary bonds between the society members and their collective in order to engage in a conflict. It makes members want to belong to their society and accept sacrifices for it. Feelings of love, care, and loyalty toward the people of the ingroup create these bonds that keep its members together (Bar-Tal, 2013). This theme was intertwined with professional pride in the interviewees' responses and had to be somewhat adapted to include feelings towards the city where they live or the group to which they belong.

Fernando expressed his commitment: "*I am a patriot, but it is tough recently. I fight for a better thing for us, and it makes me happy.*" Later, he added that "[my] *unity ranks first. There are many top-level police unities in Brazil, but definitely this flag* [points to his unity's flag on the wall] *is of utmost value.*"

Marcos shared his love for his hometown despite its challenges: "*I love Rio, but I don't want to live there again for my kids. This war has modified our way of life.*"

William also highlighted his unit's pride: "*It is not vanity; it is professionalism. We feel privileged because we put our knowledge into practice in the real world. (...) It is a privilege to belong to this unity*"

Guilherme connected patriotism to his work: "*We will overcome our situation when everyone acts. I take my responsibility to help the country get rid of this plague.*"

Lucas expressed optimism: "*Brazil is still the best place to live. I'm very proud to be Brazilian, and I'm sure we'll achieve security.*"

5.7 Unity

Unity involves fostering a sense of togetherness and cooperation within the in-group. Unity is defined by Bar-Tal (2013) as a special addition to Patriotism. It refers to the importance of neutralizing internal conflicts and disagreement when facing an external threat. These beliefs strengthen the society bonds, enhance the feelings of belonging and solidarity between its members to join forces to overcome the enemy. Interviewees emphasized the need for cooperation between law enforcement agencies and society.

Guilherme called for institutional collaboration: "*The police system needs transformation. Clashes over budget and wages must be overcome.*"

Marcos noted institutional fragmentation: "*Institutions have their own agendas with low national coordination. PCC and CV, however, have good coordination.*"

Lucas stressed societal cooperation: "*We need unity. Violence harms our economy and daily lives. Society and government need to cooperate.*"

William advocated for collaboration among police units: "*All states are interdependent. We need to work together.*"

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5.8 Peace

Beliefs about peace often present it as an aspirational goal, though achieving it requires significant effort and change. It is the societal belief theme that allow those involved in protracted conflict to hope for the end of the conflict. Peace is framed as the supreme goal of the society, and this provide positive expectations during the harsher periods of struggles and losses. They are usually general, utopian and vague terms that are closer to a dream than to an actual project for peace (Bar-Tal, 2013). Interviewees expressed hopes for a more peaceful Brazil.

Guilherme shared his vision: "*I wish for a safe and peaceful country. It is hard to see it happening soon, but we have started on the road to peace.*"

Marcos expressed a cultural perspective: "*I expect my kids to live in a peaceful country. Our culture is extroverted and friendly, enduring harsh situations with happiness.*"

Lucas analyzed the future: "*Organized crime may grow more professional, but it is not profitable for white-collar crime. I hope for a peaceful and safe Brazil.*"

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Brazil's endemic violence through the lens of Bar-Tal's ethos of conflict provides a comprehensive understanding of how deeply entrenched narratives and societal beliefs perpetuate this ongoing issue. The highlighted historical roots of violence in Brazil, stemming from colonial legacies, structural inequalities, and the rise of organized crime factions normalize societal violence. This context sets the stage for analyzing the findings, which reveal how law enforcement officers internalize and reproduce conflict-supportive (or violence-supportive) narratives. By linking the sociological features of violence in Brazil to the societal themes identified by Bar-Tal, this study underscores the necessity of addressing these ingrained beliefs to foster a culture of peace and de-escalation.

The study suggests that Brazilian law enforcement culture has embedded an ethos of conflict similar to those in protracted conflicts, perpetuating a culture of violence. The narrative justifies and rationalizes violence through societal themes identified by Bar-Tal. The complex and blurred nature of Brazil's conflict aligns with Kaldor's concept of new wars, highlighting the need for a new societal repertoire to foster a culture of peace. Of course, the analyzed sample is not big enough to generalize, but the findings in the analyzed sample are robust enough to indicate the need of further research in this direction.

Future research should focus on tracing the narrative structure and pillars of each societal theme to inform interventions aimed at changing Brazil's violent culture. Additionally, exploring the role of media in perpetuating conflict narratives and investigating successful peacebuilding initiatives in similar contexts could provide valuable insights.

The main shortcoming of this study is its reliance on a limited sample size, which may not fully represent the diverse perspectives within law enforcement. Further research with a broader and more varied participant base is necessary to validate these findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict dynamics in Brazil.

The main contributions of this article are on the outstanding presence of the eight societal themes of protracted conflict on the individual-level of at least one group involved in Brazil's protracted conflict. It was noticeable the need to slightly adapt the concept of *patriotism* in this case. Besides inspiring further development of the theory in this direction, the study suggests that fruitful strategies of conflict resolution could be implemented taking into account these findings.

Population-controlled research in this area would guide innovative policies that diverge from traditional conflict-enhancing investments aligned with the "Bullet Caucus" agenda, such as weapons purchases, expansion of police forces, increased budgets, broader gun ownership, and stricter crime laws. For instance,

strategies like promoting intergroup contact or creating a common ingroup (Tropp, 2015) hold significant potential for reducing police lethality. Recommended policies include developing narratives that support peace and de-escalate violence, with a focus on education, community engagement, and law enforcement reforms to address structural inequalities, guided by the deconstruction of the entrenched ethos of conflict.

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